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ABSTRACT

This case study examines one School Community Consultative Committee (SCCC) involved in planning and implementing a primary school Human Relationships Education program in Australia. Developments on the local level that have led to this type of parent participation are outlined. Findings from two literature reviews on parent participation are summarized. The case study outlines membership on the SCCC as including elected parents, school staff, and other community members. Committee responsibilities include knowledge of school policy and other local school programs, curriculum review, resource review, understanding the school and community profile, and representing wider community values and beliefs. Interviews with 12 committee members (principal, 6 teaching staff, and 5 parents) revealed a general belief in the theory of parent participation in schools, a perception that parents on the SCCC operated at a low level of collaboration, and the acknowledgement of a knowledge differential between staff and parents. The study concludes that, in order to make parent participation in curriculum decision making a truly constructive and genuinely participative process, the level of participation needs to be developed and gradually implemented in a direct equation with the participants' levels of knowledge regarding the organizational culture of schools. (Contains 23 references.) (JDD)

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TITLE: Understanding members' perceptions of roles on a curriculum decision-making committee: a case study of parent participation on a School Community Consultative Committee.

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This paper reports on a current case study investigating an instance of parent participation in curriculum development and outlines some preliminary findings. The case study is an examination of one School Community Consultative Committee [S.C.C.C.] involved in the planning and implementation of a primary school Human Relationships Education [H.R.E.] programme. The study focuses on the recollections of the committee members regarding their perceptions of roles, responsibilities and power while serving on the committee.

Firstly, this paper provides an outline of the developments, on the local level, that have led to this type of parent participation in schools, with consideration of supporting statements and concerns emerging from the literature. Secondly, the findings from two reviews into parent participation, done by the Queensland Education Department, are summarised. Thirdly, the case is described, including an outline of the research methods that were employed. Fourthly, some preliminary findings from the data are discussed.

LOCAL DEVELOPMENTS

The following quote from the "Focus on Schools" document highlights the broadening trend towards participatory or collaborative decision making in educational environments today.

"All members of a democratic society are entitled to participate in the education system. The public education system, therefore, needs to promote the right of school communities to participate, and to provide suitable consultative mechanisms and procedures to facilitate this process."

[Qld Department of Education- 1990, p39.]

To support the notion of more democratic processes in educational institutions, this document, also includes the concepts of "community involvement" and "consultation" in a list of key operating principles that schools should strive to demonstrate. This thrust toward more collaborative processes in the education system has been a strong initiative in Queensland over the past years with the publishing of documents such as "Participative Planning for School Development" [1988], "Community Participation in School Decision Making" [undated], "Collaborative School Review - Discussion Paper" [1990] and "Focus on Schools" [1990] by the Education Department. All these give a clear directive that education is to be viewed as a

shared community responsibility, and that a genuine partnership is to exist between those with a vested interest in it.

Consequently, our schools are presently committed to a process of change and innovation regarding their management and organisation. The underlying belief is that collaboration and consultation will build stronger and more meaningful connections between schools and the communities they serve. In turn, it is asserted that this will provide students with a more relevant and beneficial curriculum, provide opportunities for parents and other community members to develop a better understanding of school operations, and ensure that education is more responsive to local needs.

There is a vast amount of literature regarding community involvement and parent participation in education, and many theories are espoused. A majority of these publications will show support for the notion of encouraging genuine partnerships between the school and the community, and assert this to be a laudible aim, but at times, concerns are also raised regarding the practicality and success of implementing participative mechanisms.

A widely extolled theory.

Firstly, in support of parental participation, the relationship between school and home is often emphasized in the literature as a vital aspect of education, even a key issue in the politics of education (Bell & Macbeth 1989). Significant amounts of research have supported the idea of community involvement and parent participation as a catalyst to higher student achievement and few seem to doubt the positive influence of close parent - school collaboration (Brandt 1989, Wolfendale 1989 & Jowett, Baginsky & MacNeil 1991).

"Research and experience over the past twenty years have provided compelling evidence that some strategies for parent and community involvement in the educational process substantially improve the quality of students' educational experiences and their achievement in elementary and secondary schools."

[Moore, in Hess, 1992, p131]

Similar to the Departmental rationale, benefits to be reaped by schools involving community members and parents in decision-making at a local level, are detailed in the literature. Widely accepted is the view, that collaborative efforts will enhance curriculum development procedures, and enrich the curriculum itself. [Casey & Macpherson: 1990, Jennings: 1989, Soliman: 1991, Brandt: 1989] Others assert that participative decision-making can increase the relevance of the curriculum to that particular setting, create amongst the stakeholders a greater feeling of ownership of decisions, better meet local requirements, and bridge gaps that may hinder parent access to the school. [Conley & Bacharach 1990, Jennings 1989, Brandt 1989.]

"...parents and members of the wider community who participate in the management of the school can, through their contributions, act to lessen the isolation of the school from its local community." ..
[Vincent 1993 p.229]

From their research into parent participation in schools in England and Wales, Jowett and Baginsky [1991] have also suggested that the benefits derived from such activities are so significant that parent participation "should be viewed as an integral part of the way schools and services function"[p 202] and be evident as a high priority in policy and planning.

Some concerns for implementation.

Though there appears fairly extensive theoretical support for parent participation, many also acknowledge that, in practice, participative opportunities are often ill-managed token gestures, that have not been adequately developed in school policy, or missed altogether. In fact, parent participation could be argued as capable of either changing the direction and emphasis of school programs, or simply supporting the existing structures, depending on the nature of the relationship between the school administration and the community members.

Robinson argues that, depending on the administration or leadership styles in use, participation "can serve either manipulative or more democratic goals" [1993: 107]. Softman [1991] expresses some reservations about the implementation of participation, and presents the argument that participation may be used as a strategy to

avoid conflict and "obtain acquiescence" [p53], and therefore, effectively maintain the status quo. He argues that there is a concern that parent input may be sought for short term legitimation instead of long term reform and improvement.

"The view of participation which contrasts with the liberal/reformist one is that which regards participation as a mechanism for persuading people to be more accepting of established authorities and legitimating their policies, thus maintaining the existing order.....Participation may therefore, result in conservative decisions and the perpetuation of the status quo."

[Soliman 1991 p54]

A distinct knowledge differential between school staff and parents has also been identified as an obstacle to effective participation in decision-making at the school level [Gronn 1979, Pettit 1980, Moore 1992]. This knowledge is in relation to the structures and procedures specific to educational matters, or in other words, the organisational culture of the school. Fullan [1991] has linked successful ventures in parent participation to situations where members of school boards have possessed a higher degree of knowledge and understanding of these structures and procedures. Conversely, it could be said that frustrations or difficulties in the process of participation may be linked to limited knowledge in these areas.

Wolfendale [1992] draws the distinction between parents having rights and having power, suggesting that the former indicates the granting of authority, but the latter refers to the execution of that authority. It is reasonable to suggest then, that regardless of the rights that they have been granted, parent's knowledge, or lack thereof, about a school's organizational culture, can seriously impinge upon the degree to which they exercise such powers.

"...as by no means all parents possess the requisite knowledge and understanding of the system or the confidence to manipulate it, exercise of what powers parents have remains necessarily limited."

[Wolfendale 1992 p.15]

These thoughts raise serious concerns as to the nature of the partnership presently developing between school staff and parents. Adding to these concerns, is the fact that devolution of responsibility and significant community involvement in curriculum decision-making is still in its fledgling state. Therefore little is known about the equity and probity of this partnership. With this lack of information it becomes difficult to consider ways in which the process can be refined, maintained or improved.

In summary, there is genuine support for the overall concept of parent participation in educational matters and processes. However, there are also a considerable number of concerns raised regarding the most appropriate methods of implementation, and the existing potential for mis-management of participative mechanisms. So while many subscribe to this participative theory, difficulties are foreshadowed involving putting theory into practice, and it is precisely this interesting contradiction that provides a framework for the research in progress. With the literature portraying this confusion, there appeared a need for investigation into a particular case where the departmental recommendations for participatory planning have been put into action, in order to examine the partnership being developed and to examine the processes occurring. This study will make use of an opportunity to observe and analyse the activities of a particular group that has endeavoured to respond to guidelines for parent participation prescribed in the relevant Education Department documents.

QUEENSLAND DEPARTMENT REVIEWS

In 1992, the Queensland Education Department, through the Review and Evaluation Directorate, conducted two separate investigations into parent participation in schools. One report was designed to describe and evaluate the implementation of H.R.E. up to that point in time, and part of this review dealt with the ways in which parents had participated in the process. The other was designed to look at a number of recent mechanisms for parent participation, and schools' responses to these initiatives.

The review of parent participation in H.R.E. generated descriptive data about the S.C.C.C. in each of the twenty-three schools, with specific attention paid to members' perceptions of the committee's nature, operation and function. The process of collaboration in

curriculum development was identified as a critical issue in this review, and the recommendation for the future indicated that:

"...collaborative processes, involving all stakeholders, should be adopted in regions [through School Support Centres] which will draw on the insights and experiences of school communities that were early innovators of H.R.E."

[Gray 1992 p45]

This recommendation was based on their findings which showed that schools had conscientiously followed the policy and guidelines statement with regard to parent participation, and achieved levels of participation deemed successful. Of note, was the observation that participative decision-making, although possessing a future for broader application, was particularly suited to H.R.E. as it is a highly sensitive and value oriented part of the curriculum. This review also reported comprehensive involvement resulting from the attempts at collaboration, and a range of benefits to parent/teacher/community relationships [Gray 1992 pp 23-24].

There were some recurring themes found in this data regarding collaborative curriculum development. Firstly, that school communities generally accepted the idea of participative planning in H.R.E. Secondly, that delays in the development and implementation of the programme often related to difficulties in the consultative or participative processes. Caution, on the part of administrators, about having to work collaboratively with parents, complexities of developing participation in difficult school situations, and minority groups not accepting or dominating the consultative process were listed as some of these difficulties. Thirdly, that often minority groups were not represented on committees, making programmes not inclusive of all community values. Fourthly, that collaborative processes were time consuming, and there was confusion and ambiguity regarding the exact delineation of roles and responsibilities [Gray 1992].

It is apparent that, despite the difficulties mentioned, this report viewed the model of community participation, which had been developed in H.R.E., as a major achievement, a 'catalyst for change' and a 'model for the future' [Gray 1992 p44]. This model was attributed with the strengths of promoting "reflective interaction and enhanced communication within the school community." [Gray 1992 p44]

Also in 1992, the Review and Evaluation Directorate produced a report on participative decision-making in Queensland schools [Archer 1992]. This review investigated collaborative efforts which occurred in relation to School Development Plans, Individual Education Plans, Collaborative School Reviews, Special Programme School Scheme submissions, as well as Human Relationships Education across fifteen government schools.

One of the major findings was that the parents, staff, administrators and students, held a firm belief in the need for stakeholder participation and empowerment within education processes. Yet, other significant findings tended to highlight the difficulties found within the process. Some of these are listed below:

- . Parents were not perceived as equal partners in decision-making processes
- . Parents were perceived as operating at the lowest level of participation and collaboration, at the information level
- . Obstacles to participative decision-making included time and complex processes
- . the large amount of information and jargonistic language made common understandings difficult to achieve
- . Parents do not see themselves as generally able to influence decisions
[Archer 1992]

A very significant finding was the negative view held by respondents regarding the feasibility of participative decision-making.

"All groups report that parent participative decision-making is not feasible within the existing structures and processes as a result of the range of factors which have been outlined in this report."

[Archer 1992 p42]

The conclusion of this report affirms the view that, although there may be support held for the notion of collaborative efforts in schools, there are many difficulties, or sub-issues with which school communities must come to terms in order to achieve optimum levels

of participation. Confusion and ambiguity concerning roles, responsibilities, accountability, and expectations were cited in this review as major contributing factors to the apparent lack of success.

It is observed that, fundamentally, both of these reviews contain the same sentiments as the wider literature quoted earlier. In essence the view is that, although a commonly held belief in participation exists, there are considerable obstacles to its successful implementation.

THE CASE STUDY: The systemic context

In 1988 schools were provided with a, still current, interim statement, outlining the policy and guidelines for H.R.E. in Queensland schools. As well as the rationale and key elements deemed necessary for a successful H.R.E. programme, these documents included the directive that every school administration should set up a formal S.C.C.C. and describe this as the "key component in the consultative process" [1988, p.7]. The current research has focused on the Courthaven State School S.C.C.C.

The Queensland Education Department placed a deal of emphasis on the importance of this committee, in both its correct and formal establishment, and continued central involvement in the creation of a school's H.R.E. programme. Quite specific instructions, which remain consistent with the philosophy of democratising processes in education, were given as to its purpose, responsibilities and tasks.

" The School - Community Consultative Committee should be involved in the development, support and review of H.R.E. in a particular school. The committee should engage in the situational analysis necessary for the development and implementation of H.R.E. in the school."

[1988, p.6]

The committee's briefing contains numerous statements instructing that members gain comprehensive knowledge of the school and its local community in order to effect appropriate decision-making. Committee responsibilities include knowledge of the policy, knowledge of other local school programmes, curriculum review, resource review, developing an understanding of the school and community profile, and representation of the wider community values and beliefs.

Broadly, it is suggested that the membership of the committee consist of a range of elected parents and staff from that school. Students may also participate, where appropriate, as well as representatives from religious denominations, the Parents and Citizens Association, relevant community organisations, related government departments, other local educational institutions, and people who may be able to raise the committee's awareness of the school community's varying cultural perspectives. Rather than insisting that this membership be strictly adhered to, the Department suggests that it is more meaningful to ensure that the membership is appropriate to the school setting, and reflects the needs found in the school community.

"Schools vary in terms of local needs and circumstances. The membership of the committee should reflect these needs and circumstances. Members should be selected on the basis of their ability to facilitate communication between groups in the school and in the wider community."

[1988, p.6]

The school context

The significance of the current research lies in the fact that this consultative process is among the earliest instances in which so much responsibility for curriculum development has been vested in a group comprised of people other than bureaucrats and experts. The aim is to provide a rich description of this instance of participative planning, through the recollections and perceptions of the Courthaven S.C.C.C. members. This is in order to come to an understanding of the partnership that has developed between the parent and staff participants, and explore the equity and probity contained within that partnership.

Courthaven is a school of approximately 850 primary students from 550 families in a low socio-economic area. There are 3 administrators and 39 teachers on staff. From this school community, the Courthaven S.C.C.C. membership was originally anticipated to incorporate the following:

- . the principal
- . the school H.R.E. co-ordinator
- . three teacher representatives [lower, middle & upper school]

- . three parent representatives [lower, middle & upper school]
- . one P&C representative
- . a high school representative
- . a Health Department representative
- . representatives from local religious groups.

These desired levels of participation were not consistently achieved during the life of the committee. Unfortunately, a lack of parent participation had been a problem in this school community, with very few, or the same people, repeatedly volunteering to be part of these initiatives. Consequently, the S.C.C.C. occasionally had people performing dual roles, or an area of representation simply went unfilled.

The committee began meeting on a monthly basis, but this was flexible according to the amount of work generated by the school H.R.E. planning committee. This sub-committee was a separate body that amassed resources, activities, and content for the S.C.C.C. to review and approve. In order to comply with timelines, often meetings were fortnightly and even weekly. At the time of this research, the committee had been functioning for three years, with the bulk of meetings and work taking place in the last two years - 1992 and 1993.

Data collection

In order to properly describe the collaborative processes occurring in this case, the researcher endeavoured to interview all the elected members who had been fully involved in the committee process. Twelve individual interviews were performed. The interviewees were the principal, six teaching staff and five parents. An unstructured interviewing style was adopted to allow individual perceptions and unique insights to emerge. Participants were asked for responses to the following;

- . awareness of the function of the committee
- . roles of the committee members
- . enjoyment of the process
- . members' contributions to the committee process
- . perceptions of the representativeness of the committee
- . perceptions of the collaborative process
- . perceptions of power or influence held
- . knowledge of departmental requirements

The interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed for coding and analysis. The NUD.IST. software programme, designed to aid in the analysis of qualitative data, was employed. This expedited the manual shuffling of data, and also encouraged a rigorous approach to the analysing process.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Initial findings that have emerged from the data are:

- . a general belief in the theory of parent participation at the school level
- . a perception that parents on this committee operated at a low level of collaboration
- . the acknowledgement of a knowledge differential between staff and parents.

These findings are expanded in the sections below, and some proposals are made about the links between parent knowledge of a school's organisational culture, and the levels of participation and collaboration that can be expected to take place.

Belief in parent participation

Generally, the respondents supported the theory of parental involvement and participation in education. It was described by respondents as a good thing, a necessary thing, the way education is heading anyway, and even as something that is inevitable. In the case of some respondents, it seemed almost a kneejerk reaction to wholeheartedly support the movement towards this more democratic form of school management. Some respondents were emphatic about the right of parents to have a hand in directing their child's education. Peggy, a teacher, saw room for even further development of the parents' role in education, and considered this their right.

Peggy: "Yes, I would like to see them having a more active involvement - a more direct involvement - because it's their lives we are dealing with, it's their children that we are dealing with. So I think that we need to use them more, or make use of them, or basically participate with them."

This was further supported by Jennifer, another teacher, who saw parent participation as part of a continuing trend.

Jennifer: "Well I think it's going to be something of the future, school councils and all that stuff."

Carolyn, a parent, felt that parent participation allowed varied input and helped in the sharing of the decision-making process and accountability.

Carolyn: "I think it's a good idea having the parents there rather than just the teachers or Regional Office deciding well this is what you are going to do and no-one is going to complain about it, no-one is going to say anything, you have to do it this way. I think having the parents and the teachers there is a fantastic idea because it is - even though it is not like every single parent in the school it's still getting to know what they think and the teachers listen."

Further relating the notion of parent participation to accountability, Jean, a teacher, saw their participation as a way to justify, or gain acceptance for the various decisions that were reached.

Jean: "Well, it was necessary for it to be a, what word am I looking for, not authentic, but to be a proper document it had to have parents, parental involvement."

Jennifer expressed the necessity for change from what often happened in the past when parents were excluded from educational matters.

Jennifer: "I think [they are] a needed, you know, what is the opposite to absence, yeah, presence."

The theory of parent participation in educational matters was well accepted by the members of the Courthaven S.C.C.C. However, closer examination of the operation of the committee raises doubts about the effective translation of these beliefs into practice.

Nature of collaboration occurring

The term collaboration means to work together, co-operate or co-produce [Macquarie Dictionary 1985]. In this case it is intended to

refer to the methods used, and opportunities given, when designing and formulating the H.R.E. programme. This includes consideration of which components of the curriculum development parents participated in formulating, and at what stage of the process they were given the opportunity to participate. In other words, how beliefs about parental participation were put into practice. The department policy indicates that the chair of the committee, being the principal in this case, is responsible for ensuring parental involvement from the beginning to the end of the curriculum development process.

"The chair should seek the active involvement of committee members in the initial and ongoing development of H.R.E. in the school." [Qld Education Department 1988, p7]

The principal did recognize collaboration as central to the committee function and part of his role.

Joe: "I also saw it as my responsibility to facilitate collaborative input and collaborative decision-making."

The model of collaboration that was employed is described by the respondents as a process where one group did the writing of the programme and the S.C.C.C. became involved at the review and authorization stage. The parents were not involved in the formulating of policy or programmes, only in the later and higher level stages of review, modification, and approval. The group who wrote the programme, the school H.R.E. committee, was comprised of teachers only. The policy to accompany this document was written by the principal and similarly brought to the meetings for the stamp of approval from the S.C.C.C. Joe, the principal, acknowledges that this occurred.

Joe: "Well the vast majority of the policy was written by me. The programme was written basically by the teachers."

Other respondents also expressed this realization that most of the composing was being done elsewhere, meaning that the S.C.C.C. was involved in only the final stages.

Anna: "Well, most of the work was done, it was just mainly, I felt, culminating and finalizing."

Peggy: "I felt the H.R.E. [sub] committee did all the work and we did all the sitting back saying yea or nay."

There was also an inference that, because of the large amounts of work being done by separate parties, the agenda for the S.C.C.C. meetings was set and participants had little control over their content or direction. Mark, a parent, outlined these circumstances and suggested a limited role for the S.C.C.C. members.

Mark: "...but there was a process involved that was set by either those in control of what was to be said to the committee and you were basically there to add your comments on the process, to add your comments as to the content that was to be taught or how things were being taught."

Jennifer confirmed that these were the circumstances, and expressed some concerns about this level of collaboration being less than optimum. She also suggested that higher levels of collaboration may have been possible.

Jennifer: "Like we could have written some of the documents together, and he just did it and just ran them by us, which I suppose is O.K. I mean it is giving us an opportunity to have input, but it was just so quick and so much. I suppose we would have said something if something looked odd."

Comments confirming this considerable 'behind the scenes' work by teachers, further add to the idea of a distance between the parent members and the writing of the programme. Carolyn supports this and suggests that parents were limited to a 'rubber stamping' role.

Carolyn: "I thought a lot of what we said was looked at by the teachers and then they went away and like talked about it between each other and then they came back with what they thought we all wanted - to see if that was what we all wanted."

Of interest were comments suggesting that the most important tasks were being accomplished by those doing the writing, and that the materials produced were quickly and easily accepted by the committee, with few changes.

Peggy: "I felt that their work was far more important than what we were doing. We were just yeaying and naying, and most of

the time it was yes, because they were pretty thorough in the groundwork."

The model of collaboration employed in this committee was expressed by the members as largely to do with the reviewing, approving and finalising of the program. This did not allow the parents to be participants in the writing or formulating stage. One of the major reasons given for this was the limited knowledge about educational processes and structures held by members, and the time available in which to complete the programme.

A knowledge differential

A considerable number of respondents acknowledged that the teachers possessed a certain knowledge and expertise which they brought to the committee process. This was expressed as a specialised knowledge, which meant that teachers knew what would be acceptable, and what would work in the classroom and be in accordance with departmental guidelines. The parents, such as Anna, who echoed these feelings, also talked about teachers knowing the children's capabilities in an academic sense.

Anna: "...the teachers were all aware of their responsibilities and what the children were capable of and what's acceptable as far as the departmental side of things goes as well and what's probably more acceptable and what the children are capable of [comprehending] in the classroom."

Jennifer felt that teachers held a bank of knowledge which placed them leaps and bounds ahead of the parent members.

Jennifer: "Well you know, I mean we have got so much more experience like I said, college, kids, and philosophies, and parents, and rah rah rah, they can't grasp that in a year on the committee."

Joe also indicated that the teachers held quite developed and specific skills and knowledge in the area of H.R.E. which allowed them to become very effective committee members. This was an indication of the very practical side to teachers' organisational and planning skills and the benefits of their experience in this area for the committee.

Joe: "The teachers brought a lot of hard work I think, and because the teachers basically handled the programme side of it, they brought the expertise that came from their actual involvement in H.R.E. And I go right back to when some teachers started with the cluster. We were fortunate enough to have people like Linda - and others joined her - going along to those cluster meetings very early. This meant they were quite familiar with what we were aiming towards, what the requirements of the departmental procedures and policy were before we actually sat down and started to put the programme together. But being experienced teachers as well, they were also aware of the curriculum areas, the areas where there was an overlap and all the other aspects about the actual H.R.E. program itself from an instructional point of view."

Anna supported this notion of the very practical applications of the teachers' knowledge, suggesting that in some instances, they knew best.

Anna: "Oh, it's got to be an advantage, it's got to be an advantage. Yes the planning and organisation part of it, what was going to work best, an example of that is probably what we have got them in, how we would arrange the sourcebooks and how we are going to have the ... what book did we decide we were going to put in that orange cover?"

Interviewer: "The policy and procedures."

Anna: "Yes, that's right. You know, I mean that was just one example that you knew how it was going to be best... because you knew from the teacher's side of it how it was going to work."

Jodie, a teacher, suggested that teachers possess a clearer understanding of the processes involved in developing a curriculum programme, and the red tape and organisational skills involved in such a process. Also she felt they were able to realize the practical implications of the programme that had been developed, for teachers in the classroom.

Jodie: "The teachers have all the nitty-gritty that goes on with programming and teaching - they are actually there, they are in the field as they say, and they can relate how different exercises work, how different activities work, what the children's responses are. So as policy documents are written and parents make comments, the teachers can say, oh no, they don't think

having limited abilities, and the time consuming nature of redressing this inequality, seems to have led to the opportunities for participation being restricted to the final stages of the programme development. Therefore, the efforts observed on this committee were less than optimum levels of collaboration or participation.

CONCLUSIONS

There would seem to be a sensible correlation, then, between the participants knowledge of the organisational culture of a school, and the expectations for participation and collaboration that can be reasonably placed upon them. Early conclusions in this study are suggesting that there is a direct link between the levels of participation occurring on the committee, and levels of knowledge held by the participants. From this comes the further suggestion that the expectation, or premature implementation, of high levels of participation without the development of knowledge may lead to frustrating and less than satisfying results. What may be confirmed by such deficient practice, is the parents' own doubts about their abilities to contribute to the process effectively, and the cynic's view that educational decision-making never was an appropriate arena for parental participation.

It is proposed, that in order to make parent participation in curriculum decision-making a truly constructive and genuinely participative process, the levels of participation need to be developed and gradually implemented, in a direct equation with the participants' levels of knowledge regarding the organisational culture of schools.

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like that or they wouldn't work that way, or that particular area is too advanced for children."

This knowledge was accepted as part of being a teacher and was attributed to prior experience on similar committees, tertiary training and teaching experience. On the other hand, it was conceded that parents did not possess this knowledge. Jennifer repeatedly expressed concern at the parents' lack of knowledge and experience in matters such as curriculum and planning, which formed some of the committee duties.

Jennifer: "...about decision making stuff, about programmes, about kids and where they are at. See basically they can't be in the know. I mean we are the ones that have the experience in dealing with children, dealing with parents too."

Jennifer: "Certainly the parents don't understand the teachers and what our job is because even a few things that were raised at the meetings, they did not understand that we have to teach all the subjects, that we have to give time to especially language and maths. I mean, that is what makes up most of our days. They didn't seem to understand that at times, just the basic things like that."

Other respondents recognised this knowledge differential, and the potential it had to frustrate the committee process. Joe indicated that any efforts to redress this gap could be very time consuming.

Joe: "What took time was going through that with all the parents."

He also inferred that this had constituted a major obstacle to parents increasing their participative role and becoming active at the writing and formulating stage of the process.

Joe: "In the end I wrote most of the policy and I didn't really intend doing that, but it became apparent after a while that the parents were not used to writing policy, and not skilled in writing policy."

So, this knowledge differential becomes an important issue as it seems to be the reason for the parents' participative opportunities being limited in this case. The teachers' perception of the parents as

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